RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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INNOVATIVE HOUSING FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

Research Program

Method

This research project was aimed at identifying innovative housing projects for homeless youth and the factors which made these projects exemplary. The report is focused on international experience, specifically in the United States and Europe, since Canadian experience is already well documented.

A review of previous research and interviews with key informants were used to identify issues for homeless youth. This review also identified exemplary practices and key people working in the sector. Two criteria were used to select the initiatives to be studied in depth: 1) the initiatives must specifically address youth and 2) the projects should provide services directly to youth.

Twelve projects in the United States, France and Great Britain were identified and are presented in the study.

Review of Prewvious Research

Characteristics of homeless youth

The common denominator among young people who have no fixed address is premature departure from the home or family. The family of origin is characterized by a great deal of instability, by the shortcomings of normally protective units that have become inadequate or destructive.

Young people who leave their families do so in a context in which there is no other choice. Although they may have high hopes with respect to their extended family, extended family members are often unable to assume an active role in the young people's lives. Thus, young people without families lose not only shelter, but all at once become exposed to all the dangers from which the family is supposed to protect them.

For youth, as for adults, homelessness is the result of a developmental path. Often this process is not a straight line, but is circular, with episodes of returning to the family home, sharing housing with friends, and living without shelter. A long period with no fixed address can lead to new problems that often arise from the methods used to survive, such as drug dealing, prostitution, theft and criminalization. A conviction, even for a minor offence, can lead to or further exacerbate problems.

In Canada, as elsewhere, youth with no fixed address also have poor education and job skills. Their health is not good, and they have problems with addiction, mental health and criminality. The gender distribution among homeless youth is distinct from that of adults; unlike older homeless people, girls are well-represented among homeless youth.

Young gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual youth are over-represented. A final sub-group includes youth in institutional care as the result of intervention by youth protection services.

The needs of youth

A lack of relationships and isolation are significant factors in the lives of homeless youth. They themselves identify their need for relationships as of primary importance. Though family conflict plays a pivotal role in youth homelessness, continuation of family relationships is important.

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Homeless youth identify four types of help as key:

1. compassion (which includes individualized and unconditional attention);
2. limits to and consequences for their actions;
3. practical assistance (including housing, food, money);
4. professional intervention (may be listening and dialogue or may go as far as residential placement with support).

Interventions

A wide range of approaches are necessary to meet the needs of homeless youth.

Interventions can include support for families, since the majority of young people return home after staying in a shelter. In Rotterdam, an alternative has been developed where a family relationship is not possible. In these cases, the youth who lives alone is given a "buddy" with whom to spend leisure time.

It is emphasized that work is the most significant factor in social integration, since it represents financial independence and also because assisted housing, without daily activities, leads to isolation and increases the chances of failure.

Shelters are a significant key to meeting immediate needs and also for accommodating young people who have experienced abuse or who come from families in crisis.

In England, some foyers provide on-site assistance with job readiness, whereas other projects deal with both job readiness and support, to increase the self-confidence and motivation of youth. Programs may also be offered in life skills, including cooking, budgeting, health and interpersonal relationships.

In France, social integration of youth is a major concern, and youth represent 44 per cent of those receiving assistance in making the transition to work. Cities and general councils have implemented counselling and accommodation centres for youth in difficulty, in order to prevent crises. The government has encouraged the development of these counselling and accommodation facilities.

In the United States, programs are implemented by state and local governments and require local planning and collaboration. The approach depends on a continuum of support, with a process that leads to independence and permanent housing. Homeless youth are offered financial support for immediate needs, including emergency shelter, as well as access to mental health services. Assistance is available for residential projects intended for young people between 16 and 21 years of age, and to organizations who do street work.

Solutions

Recent studies highlight the central role of housing as a solution to the problems of homelessness. However, while a stable home may be very important, it is clear that, for certain subgroups including youth, support services are necessary. An analysis of effective models for youth reveals the following elements: a safe and affordable home, constant emotional support, a relationship with at least one responsible and trustworthy adult, the opportunity to develop life skills leading to autonomy, and access to services such as training, education, employment readiness, and health care including mental health. The studies also show the need for social ties. Participation and control issues were often raised.

Homelessness can last for years. Motivation and self-confidence are the deciding factors. Enduring support that is centred on the individual, within a framework of mutual effort, is essential.

"Ordinary" housing that is distributed throughout the community seems to be most people's preference, when it is safe and includes access to flexible and long-term support services, training and meaningful activities, as well as social connections including friends and family.

Case Studies

The twelve selected projects made it possible to identify some common elements that are essential to success with homeless youth.

Case studies were conducted of the following organizations:

1.	Safe in the City	London, England
2.	Espace de socialisation (Association rues et cités)	Montreuil, France
3.	Point de Repère	Lille, France
4.	Common Ground Foyer Program	New York, USA
5.	Scattered Site Housing	Glasgow, Scotland
6.	Green Chimneys	New York, USA
7.	Habitat Alternatif Social	Marseille, France
8.	Urban Peak	Denver, Colorado, USA
9.	Bridge over Troubled Waters	Boston, Mass. USA
10.	YouthCare	Seattle, Washington, USA
11.	Centrepoint	London, England
12.	The Foyer Federation	Great Britain

These projects offer a range of services, approaches, and housing assistance, supported by multi-disciplinary services.

Three of the projects presented do not provide residential services. Safe in the City is focused only on prevention; L'Espace de Socialisation and the Point de Repère provide only support and accompaniment services. Four projects provide only one service and, in the case of Green Chimneys, to a specific population. Other projects provided a range of services and residences. The final project described is in fact a federation. It was included because the foyer movement is becoming increasingly important and is eliciting a great deal of interest. Two foyer approaches are presented: Common Ground, a project that is currently under development and which will be the first of this type in the United States; and the foyer approach as developed in the U.K. by the Foyer Federation.

The information presented comes from three sources: interviews with project managers or directors, information from Web sites, and reports when available.

Significant characteristics arising from the case studies:

- The project must be centred on youth and their needs. The projects show that youth should not be forced into the process if they are not ready. In many cases, this means giving young people the means to reduce harm: clean syringes, condoms, or simply some information.
- Youth must demonstrate their desire to do something about their situation; this may be as simple as taking the bus to get to a shelter. Steps like this are part of the definition of success, measured in small victories and increased self-esteem and confidence, which are essential elements that enable young people to take the next step.
- Methods for reaching young people must be in place at all levels to carry them from one stage to the next, whether that means offering sandwiches or clothing as part of street work, or day courses or special interest classes to interest them in training and education.
- Relationships of trust are essential.
- An individualized approach is recommended, with a range of services or links to such services to help the young person.
- Programs must offer more than shelter—a global approach that integrates personal support, a response to specific problems such as addiction, and long-term empowerment strategies such as training and education.
- Well-defined steps with a joint evaluation process, as in the case of HAS, the Habitat Alternatif Social, in Marseille, France, with adjustments to the process as needed.
- In many projects, the young person's homelessness is only one phase in her or his life—a difficult, but transitional, stage. Thus, the service provided is perceived as a jumping-off point and the project is designed so that involvement in the neighbourhood, employment or education is an integral part. This approach seems to be most developed in France, along with policies that focus mainly on "reintegration" of those who are excluded.
- In addition, neighbourhood involvement, which connects young people with available services and activities, is one means of alleviating the difficulties that many of these projects deal with: the loneliness and isolation experienced by young people who have completed their transition and are living independently.
- Many projects include some kind of family mediation (even though the young person may not return to the family often) recognizing that these relationships are important and may in some cases provide some support. Safe in the City (London), the only prevention project that was identified, identifies the family as one of the three main focuses of their work.
- The use of existing services, often in partnership, is a common element among many of the projects. French projects, as well as Safe in the City in London, rely heavily on other available services. Some foyer projects have been criticized for implementing services without assessing those that are already available, thereby duplicating resources.
- Project size was not a factor in and of itself, but the projects in general seem to want to limit themselves in terms of the number of youths accommodated in one location. Projects such as Centrepoint in London spread out and decentralize their services. On the other end of the spectrum are shelters such as those in Glasgow, which show that large projects are no longer desirable. An assessment of foyers revealed that some of them, which were too large, had problems managing violence, vandalism and drugs, and were often too "institutional".
- The "sliding" lease makes it possible for youth to have permanent housing right away and seems to be a successful formula. Without having to go through all residential phases, each one requiring the young person to move once again, this program makes it possible to "slide" the lease once the young person has made it through the defined steps. This approach normalizes the young person's situation and makes it possible for her or him to settle in and establish ties in the neighbourhood early on in the process.

- Although the causes of youth homelessness are known, there are very few prevention projects. Safe in the City in one of the few identified and clearly merits additional follow-up.

Other unexplored issues

Several issues still need to be addressed. In the research on homelessness and the services provided, there is very little research that includes follow-up: where are the clients one or two years afterwards? Are they homeless again or have they resolved the situation? The fact that people are mobile—they move and leave no forwarding address—is one of the reasons. On the other hand, the agencies that do the work rarely have the means to undertake such research. Thus the definition of an exemplary project is still subjective and is based on the perceptions of experts rather than on data.

The programs examined raise the question of the steps necessary to the residential process. In many cases, the residential projects provide variable levels of support, such as group homes, transition houses or supervised housing that facilitates independent living. Commitments from tenants are generally expected, even to the extent of signing a housing contract, and a personalized accompaniment contract. An evaluation of the overall process after several months may lead to the young person staying where they are, being redirected if commitments are not met, or being redirected toward a more adapted service and a "sliding" lease. This latter formula, with the stability it represents, is a possibility that should be explored further.

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Housing Research at CMHC

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